N.W.T. Advisory Council
on the
Status of Women

BRIEF TO
THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON THE NORTHERN ECONOMY

March 11, 1989

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Thank you for inviting the NWT Advisory Council on the Status of Women to appear before the Special Committee on the Northern Economy.

Although there are many issues related to the active participation of women in the economy, I would like to focus on two important areas which affect the contribution of women to the Northern economy:

1. Barriers to the full participation of women in the workplace.

2. Government of the NWT arts and crafts policy and programs.

1. WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

There are a number of barriers to the full participation of women in the work force: lack of training and/or education, low self-esteem, lack of occupational role models, male-dominated organizations, lack of pay equity. The most obvious barriers, however, stem from society's expectation that women bear the primary responsibility for child care. Many women who work, whether by choice or by economic necessity, encounter great difficulties in combining child care responsibilities and employment or training in the face of a lack of child care services and an inflexible workplace.

1.1 Child Care

In 1986 in the NWT, 5180 women with children age 14 and under were in the labour force. This represented 60% of all women with children under 14. Even among women with children under the age of 6, 2605 women or 56% were in the labour force.

In many communities the extended family can no longer provide child care, and few other alternatives exist for the mother who works or takes training. The Government of the NWT has recognized this, yet has only brought forward a partial child care program which is underfunded and will only address the child care problem in a limited number of communities. It also does not include support for part-time child care or school-age care, which are of concern to many employed women.

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In order to address the current child care crisis, which severely affects the ability of many women to maintain employment or take training, it is recommended that:

1.1.1. The Government of the NWT immediately expand the Interim Child Care Program to include part-time and school-age care.

1.1.2. The Government of the NWT immediately expand the Interim Child Care Program to make affordable licensed child care available in all NWT communities where a need exists.

While discussing child care, we must recognize that the Child Care Program itself will have important economic spin-offs. Many new employment opportunities will be created for child care workers, therefore training in early childhood education will have to keep pace with the demand for trained child care staff. It is therefore recommended that:

1.1.3. The Department of Education should provide funding to Arctic College for the provision of the second year of the two year Early Childhood Education certification course.

1.1.4. The Department of Education should provide funding to Arctic College for the development and delivery of modular early childhood education course components leading to certification, in NWT communities.

1.2. Structure of the Workplace

The difficulties of reconciling child care responsibilities and the rigid structure of the workplace place undue stress on many families, and particularly on women. There are a number of areas where the Government can lead the way with important changes in the workplace which will help women (and men) remain employed while caring for their families.

Flexible Work Hours
- staggered work hours can allow both parents to share some of the pre-school and after-school child care.

Job-sharing
- this gives both men and women the opportunity to remain permanently employed but with reduced hours. In this way child care can be shared by the parents part of the day.

Parental Leave
- there is no legislated parental leave to care for a sick child in Canada, yet several European countries have such legislation. Special leave is however included in some union contracts, such as the GNWT Collective Agreement which provides for up to 5 consecutive working days for this purpose, at the discretion of the supervisor.

To assist women in maintaining employment it is recommended that:

1.2.1. The Government of the NWT adopt a policy in the workplace to better meet the needs of parents, including flexible work hours, job-sharing, and increased special leave for child care responsibilities.

1.2.2. Through labour standards, the Government of the NWT encourage other employers to adopt similar practices.

1.2.3. Parental leave be included under labour standards legislation as a right of all workers in the NWT.

Women represent half of the adult population and 42% of the current labour force, and have much to contribute to the Northern economy. One of your Members has noted that in some smaller NWT communities, it is the young women who are assuming more and more of the key jobs in the community, while men continue to hunt, fish, and trap.

Yet lack of reliable child care and the structure of the workplace continue to make long-term employment or training difficult for women. Action to break down some of these barriers will allow a greater number of Northern women to realize their potential, and the NWT will benefit as a result.

1.3. Affirmative Action Policy

It has been recognized by the Government of the NWT that women face barriers for entry into and advancement in the workplace. Women continue to be underrepresented in managerial positions and non-traditional occupations such as skilled trades.

For this reason it was directed that women (and disabled persons) be included in the Government of the NWT affirmative action employment policy. However despite the lapse of several years this has not been done.

In addition, the effective functioning of an affirmative action policy must constantly be scrutinized. In order to operate effectively, such a policy must be concerned with more than the numbers of disadvantaged persons employed. It is not an exercise in statistics, yet this appears to be the primary focus of those responsible for implementation of such policies. Unless such a policy is coupled with training support and efforts to dislodge existing stereotypes, such programs will in effect result in further disadvantaging the groups it was intended to benefit. It does so by placing individuals in jobs which they are not trained to handle, it creates negative backlash among other employees and operates to reinforce those stereotypes which we are attempting to dissolve.

Although affirmative action employment policies affect only the Government of the NWT civil service, the spin-offs to the economy as a whole are readily apparent. The civil service is a large employer in this jurisdiction. The development of the skills and abilities of persons within that employment sector can only serve to benefit the economy as a whole. This is not to say that the focus of any inquiry ought to be primarily on the public sector. Likely the converse is true. But the important role that the public sector plays cannot be ignored.

We therefore recommend:

1.3.1. That women and disabled persons be included immediately in the affirmative action employment strategies of the Government of the NWT.

1.3.2. That affirmative action employment policies be coupled with adequate training and education programs to promote the development of skills of those employed.

2. ARTS AND CRAFTS POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

The crafts skills of Northern women have always been essential to the traditional economy. Without the fine sewing skills of women in making clothing and other articles from moosehide, caribou and sealskin, Northern societies would not have survived.

In more recent times, finely sewn articles and related art such as moosehair tuftings have also become highly valued in non-native and southern markets. Arts and crafts production has become a major source of income for many Northern families, while continuing to be a source of pride and an enduring expression of traditional culture. Much of this work is done by women at home, fitted in around other family activities and child rearing; it is thus a cottage industry.

With the move to privatization by the Department of Economic Development and Tourism several years ago, several Government craft shops closed. Women who had relied on the craft shop for materials, marketing, and networking with other producers, were left without support. This potentially valuable cottage industry has suffered as a result.

The current situation of the arts and crafts cottage industry must be addressed. In 1988 the NWT Advisory Council on the Status of Women commissioned a study on the situation of women producers of arts and crafts, and I will leave several copies of this study with you. It details the state of confusion and discouragement in which many members of this cottage industry find themselves, and offers many recommendations.

To begin addressing the problems of art and crafts, we would make the following recommendations to the Special Committee:

2.1.1. The Department of Economic Development and Tourism should re-evaluate its privatization policy regarding Government craft shops.

2.1.2. There must be a Territorial policy for arts and crafts that includes active support and development of the cottage industry.

2.1.3. The Government of the NWT should fund regional workshops for women craft producers, for the development of both creative and business skills, and to give women producers a more active role in arts and crafts policy-making and programs.

2.1.4. The Government of the NWT should establish an interdepartmental co-ordinating committee of representatives from Economic Development and Tourism, Education, Arctic College, Renewable Resources, Culture and Communications, and the Women's Secretariat, to coordinate action to assist the arts and crafts cottage industry.

I strongly urge the Special Committee to recommend to the Legislative Assembly that immediate action be taken to support and develop the arts and crafts cottage industry, which has great economic potential and equally great social and cultural significance.

Katherine Peterson
President